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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 RPO DUBAI 000176

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SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING THE IRANIAN ELECTORATE

REF: RPO 72

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CLASSIFIED BY: Timothy Richardson, Acting Director, Iran  
Regional Presence Office, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: The Iranian electorate comprises a diverse mix of voters, including the true believers, the scared voters, and those just looking for moderate improvement. This year, much discussion has centered on four groups of voters: rural voters, urban voters, young voters, and a potential bloc of IRGC/Basij votes. Rural voters are considered Ahmadinejad's base of support but accurately gauging his standing in the provinces is extremely difficult. IRPO contacts say that his promises of economic development both help and hurt the president, without really knowing where he stands. Urban voters have recently stayed away from the polls, ceding influence, to the rural areas. However, many of our Tehran-based contacts anticipate greater participation this year, largely stemming from an anti-Ahmadinejad vote.

¶2. (S) Summary, cont'd: Iran's demographics dictate the importance of the youth vote—roughly 18 million of the 42 million eligible voters are between the ages of 18 and 27. Their proportion of the electorate present a distinct vulnerability to presidential candidate Mir Hosseyn Mousavi, whose 20-year absence from politics makes him a relative unknown among the youth. Perhaps overstated, however, is the importance of the IRGC/Basij. IRPO contacts generally dismiss fears that the IRGC will unite behind a particular candidate even while acknowledging that the Basij may again be mobilized. End summary.

Rural Voters Take Center Stage~

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¶3. (S) Rural voters have played an increasingly outsized role in recent elections. According to an IRPO contact with family in the provinces, elections in rural areas remain a community event. Much of the town on election day will attend Friday Prayers and then collectively head to the polls. Although she observed there was not necessarily pressure to vote for a particular candidate, peer pressure induced many in the community to vote (Note: The election is on a Friday, June 12. If no candidate wins a majority of the vote, the second round will be held the next Friday, June 19). According to press reports, despite accounting for 35 percent of the national population in 2005, Iran's rural voters cast 50 percent of the votes. Even though Iran's 2006 census shows a drop in the rural share of population to roughly 30 percent, such voters are still almost certain to be a disproportionate share of those casting ballots.

¶4. (S) Iran's presidential contenders recognize the rural vote's newfound importance, and indeed, it is a critical component of Ahmadinejad's re-election campaign. Ahmadinejad's now-famous provincial trips had brought him to Iran's hinterlands 52 times by February, according to one estimate. Along the way, he has provided cash handouts to those attending his rallies and promised large public works projects to the tune of billions of dollars. His provincial visits drew thousands and probably earned the president a reservoir of support. However, Ahmadinejad's largesse and promises in the provinces cut both ways, according to our contacts. An Iranian constitutional law expert and former political analyst in Iran said that Ahmadinejad "overpromises" but does deliver on at least some of his pledges, leaving some voters satisfied with provincial development and others disappointed with the broken promises. A prominent political scientist at Tehran University cautiously speculated that, due to his overpromises, Ahmadinejad's rural support has declined.

¶5. (C) Ahmadinejad's opponents in the 2009 election are following his lead. Former President Khatami, before dropping out of the election, began his campaign with visits to several provinces. Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi visited the provinces in April. Still, the reformers will not be able to match the time Ahmadinejad has spent cultivating support in the provinces and nor will their trips garner the same media coverage awarded to the president.

¶6. (S) How the provinces will vote is difficult to gauge. A Japanese diplomat posted to Tehran implied in a meeting with IRPO that he had little insight into the rural areas, despite his own trips to the provinces. Similarly, the Iran political analyst cited above said his political consulting firm in 2005

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found predicting rural voting difficult.

¶7. (S) In early April IRPO officers spoke with several Iranian merchants in Dubai's spice souk as a proxy for the rural vote. The merchants hailed from different parts of Fars province, in the south of Iran, and spend about three-quarters of the year in Dubai and the rest in Iran. The merchants were notable for their interest in the election and the range of their views. All were following the election closely, to the point that a few were eagerly anticipating Mousavi's first news conference later that day.. Some supported Ahmadinejad and his hardline approach; another believed Iran needed a more moderate face. Another group, explaining their reluctance to participate, said Supreme Leader Khamenei's vote outweighs all others. There was no clear favorite among the merchants.

~While Urban Voters Stayed Away

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¶8. (S) Rural voters would not have reached such prominence without urban voters' increasing apathy. Tehran is illustrative in this regard, where recent turnout has mostly been under 30 percent, according to press reports. Were the urban areas to turnout in proportion to their 70 percent share of the population they would easily determine the election's outcome. There are nascent signs that urban areas will participate in greater numbers this year. A marketing director in her early

30s who moved to Dubai from Tehran in January told IRPO that she and all her friends intend to vote, as do all her friends. He said they all stayed home in 2005 and "look what happened." She characterized Ahmadinejad's time in office as a disaster. Another IRPO contact, an older businessman who splits his time between Tehran and Dubai predicted turnout would match that of Khatami's era. For Iran's educated elite, he said, the most pressing issue is not the faltering economy but rather the relationship with the USG. Not surprisingly, they want to replace Ahmadinejad with someone who better represents Iran to the international community. A Tehran University political scientist expects turnout to exceed the turnout in 2005, but he does not expect it to approach that of the Khatami elections.

¶9. (S) As we have reported earlier, IRPO has spoken with many urban Iranians who previously voted for Khatami but now voice little interest in Iranian politics (reftel). Some Iranian visa seekers in Dubai, even if they agree the election is important, have said they do not intend to vote. One woman commented that although life is worse under Ahmadinejad, it was still bad under Khatami. Such dissatisfied urban voters are the reformers' natural constituency. Overcoming their reticence to vote is a principal challenge for reformist candidates.

#### Engaging Iran's Youth

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¶10. (C) Equally challenging, and critical, will be drawing Iran's youth to the polls. In this election, there will be fewer voters participating solely to exercise a new-found right, as most of Iran's youth came of voting age in 2005. By dint of their numbers, however, an Iranian political consultant based in Tehran deemed the Iranian youth the key to the election. According to the 2006 census, the 15 to 24 age bracket includes nearly 18 million Iranians and with roughly three years since the census' publication, most of this age group should now be eligible to vote. However, outside of the Basij, politicians and political parties have not demonstrated effective get-out-the-vote strategies and it is not clear if they will be able to do so.

¶11. (S) Although much of the reformist movement in Iran is coalescing around Mousavi, the youth remain a distinct vulnerability. Due to his roughly 20-year absence from Iranian politics, many Iranian youth do not know him. IRPO conoff has several times asked young Iranians for their opinion of Mousavi and, when met with blank stares, been forced to explain who he is. At the same time, Khatami's endorsement can help Mousavi overcome this hurdle. A few visa applicants have commented that Khatami's endorsement is very meaningful to them. Even though

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they know little about Mousavi, Khatami's support is sufficient for them to vote for him.

#### The IRGC and Basij Factor

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¶12. (S) Fears of that the IRIG will tilt the system in favor of a preferred candidate, Ahmadinejad in this case, often center on the IRGC and Basij. Our contacts largely discount the idea that the IRGC will favor one candidate or that the organization

represents a homogeneous voting bloc. The Tehran University political scientist cited above argued the conscripts in the IRGC are more likely to match the public's voting trend rather than collectively support a favored IRGC candidate. Beyond that, he estimated 30 to 40 percent of the committed "Sepahis" hate Ahmadinejad and his management of the country.

¶13. (S) In a review of the 2005 presidential election, the former political analyst, who was in Tehran at the time, wrote that the Basij's chief influence in the election was their ability to mobilize voters. That potential still exists. One observer thinks the Basij may again be mobilized to vote for Ahmadinejad. If the other candidates in this election are unable to create a similar network, the Basij will remain a distinct advantage for Ahmadinejad, particularly if the election is close.

¶14. (S) Whether the Basij actually carries out direct fraud is another question. In his review of the 2005 election, the political analyst discounted the likelihood that fraud was a significant factor in the election. In this election, however, several IRPO contacts maintain the risk of fraud is greater because the institutions charged with overseeing the election--the Interior Ministry and the Council of Guardians--are in conservative hands. The Interior Minister is a long-time ally of the president and Ahmadinejad's opponents recently criticized the Secretary of the Guardians Council for openly supporting the president.

Comment:

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¶15. (S) in the groups of voters discussed above--rural voters, urban voters, young voters, and the IRGC/Basij--the voters seem more a heterogeneous mix than a uniform bloc of voters, rendering it difficult to anticipate how the different groups will vote on June 12. Despite the variety of opinions, the majority of our interlocutors believe this election is very important and anticipate higher turnout than the 60 percent in ¶2005. It may go even higher as many Iranians consider the costs of another four years of Ahmadinejad.

¶16. (S) Many Iranians have said the election is important because Iran needs to rid itself of Ahmadinejad and many plan to vote for that reason alone. Ahmadinejad in 2005 benefitted from a distinct anti-Rafsanjani vote. This year, it appears Ahmadinejad's opponents will benefit from what may be a sizeable anti-Ahmadinejad vote.

RICHARDSON